

Synopsis

Imperial Airways First Flight, London - Cape Town

Christmas Flight, December 9 - 21, 1931

Historical Background

Imperial Airways (forerunner of BOAC and British Airways) had humble beginnings - first in Britain, then Europe and finally the British Empire. Each continent was a challenge. The first flights were to the middle east in 1927, India in 1929, Africa in 1931 and 1932, and Australia in 1934. Communication and the promotion of trade and commerce with the far corners of the Empire was the objective of the airline. As improvements in technology made flight by man more readily available and accessible, it was inevitable that mail by airplane was one of the first beneficiaries of commercial flight. The new flights were the start of advancing north-south communication and travel. The route was 8,500 miles with aircraft flying visually at about 100 miles per hour over varied inhospitable terrain.

Scope

There were five historic and noteworthy "First Flights" to Africa that are recorded and documented in the archives of the company and historians. There is also the philatelic evidence provided along the route by the mail carried on these first flights. **This exhibit is the third flight listed:**

- 1) February 28 - March 9, 1931 - London, England to Mwanza, Tanganyika - Outbound flight to East Africa
- 2) March 10 - 19, 1931 - Mwanza, Tanganyika to London, England - Return flight to London England
- 3) December 9 - 21, 1931 - London, England to Cape Town, South Africa - Experimental Christmas flight**
- 4) January 20 - February 2, 1932 - London to Cape Town - First regular scheduled flight southbound
- 5) January 27 - February 16, 1932 - Cape Town to London - First regular scheduled flight northbound

(Flights 1, 2, 4 and 5 are covered in three other separate exhibits)

Plan & Organization

This exhibit is organized by cachet type, then geographically and finally chronologically. For each cachet, the earliest points of origin are recorded first, working geographically toward the final destination. As the aircraft made stops at a number of countries, covers are identified by each country's postage and cancel markings leaving evidence of point of origin, the destination and dates. Unusual and exceptional items are identified with a **red border**

Material Available

A considerable amount of mail was carried on this first flight. The first scheduled flight was to begin in late January 1932. However, Imperial Airways had to send various aircraft to Africa for the various sections of the route. With only ten days notice, it was decided by officials to allow mail to be sent with the aircraft. As a result of this short notice, the specially prepared "Springbok" covers intended for the scheduled first flight in January 1932 were used for the special "experimental" Christmas flight, as it was called. Philatelists hastily prepared these springbok cachet covers along with other cacheted and regular covers. A considerable number of the springbok covers were carried over and used for the other first scheduled flights in late January 1932. Imperial Airways was quite advanced in promoting and marketing the first flights by issuing special first flight covers which were sold to the public for 1d each. For those who did not, or could not purchase the special cachet covers, they sometimes provided their own markings to commemorate the flight. Otherwise, the proof of the first flight is identified by the postmark, added postage required and an air mail etiquette.

Philatelic Element

A number of philatelic elements are shown in this exhibit. The two most distinguishing features of any air mail are: 1) air mail marking or an "Air Mail" etiquette and 2) correct air mail postage. Other philatelic elements included in this exhibit are pre-printed cachets, rubber stamp instructions and notes, registration, forwarding and returning instructions, "Jusqua" markings and others.

Bibliography/References

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